Concerns of the Churchill Committee of the Northern Municipal Council About the Proposed Dam at Wintego Rapids on the Churchill River

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Northern Municipal Council
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June, 1977

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Following the completion of the Churchill River Study (CRS), the Saskatchewan government felt that the communities in the area which would be directly affected by the proposed Wintego Dam should have an opportunity to review the findings of the study, find out how their communities would be affected, and form opinions and conclusions about the proposal. In order to pass on the study's findings to the people of these communities, the Churchill Committee was formed in October, 1976 composed of Chairmen of the local community councils (LCA's or LAC's) of Sandy Bay, Pelican Narrows, Deschambault, Southend, and Stanley Mission, and two members of the Northern Municipal Council.

The Committee is formed of the following members:

Leon McAuley, Committee Chairman
Nap Sanderson, Vice-Chairman
Alpheus McLeod, Stanley Mission LAC (Alternate: Dennis McLeod)
Richard McKenzie, Southend LAC (Alternate: Joe Cook)
Cornelius Ballantyne, Deschambault LAC (Alternate: Simon Sewap)
Louis Bear, Sandy Bay LCA (Alternate: Daniel Bear)
Ernest McKay, Pelican Narrows LAC (Alternate: Melvin Nataweyes)

In addition to informing local people of the results of the Churchill River Study, the Committee was to carry out additional studies where necessary, and aid the communities in preparing briefs for the Churchill River Board of Inquiry. These briefs were to contain the opinions, concerns and recommendations of each community regarding the Wintego proposal and alternate economic developments in the area.

After examining the CRS reports, the Committee found that the study had concentrated on the area as a whole, but did not examine the potential effects on <u>each</u> community. It was difficult to interpret the CRS reports on a community level, since the only community which had been studied in detail was Sandy Bay. Therefore, the Committee felt that additional information should be gathered to identify what the effects of the Wintego Dam would be for each community.

The Committee found that:

a) The CRS did not provide information on the economic, social, cultural and environmental effects which could be expected in each community.

b) Information on the potential value of the area for <u>alternate</u> kinds of development such as forestry, tourism, a provincial or national park, or more intense use of local resources, was not provided.

c) The CRS studied only a narrow area along the Churchill and Reindeer Rivers. An overall land use study of the entire basin should have been carried out to determine development possibilities and aid future planning of the area.

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d) The study failed to come up with one set of recommendations which took the findings of all study sectors into account.

As a result, the Committee feels that the true impact of the dam has not been properly assessed.

Since local people were overlooked as an important source of information, valuable information about the potential impact of a Wintego Dam on people of the area was not gathered. Detailed information on local peoples' use of the land and water which would be affected was not gathered, (such as how many trappers and commercial fishermen would be directly affected in each community, and to what extent? How culturally important are these traditional pursuits? What other job opportunities are available if their old ways of life are no longer possible?)

Since the potential of the Churchill basin for economic development alternatives was not examined, how is it possible to make a wise decision on the future of the area? For example, how valuable is the Churchill River preserved in its natural state as a historic wilderness river for future generations? Such rivers are becoming extinct in North America, and may be a priceless heritage. The area also has a high potential for tourism and forestry. Even the current traditional economy is much more valuable now than it was at the time of the Churchill River Study. Fur prices were at a record high in 1977, and average incomes from commercial fishing have doubled since the time of the CRS.[1] Effects of the dam would be disastrous for both commercial fishing and for many trappers in the area. Without assessing the full present value of the basin, and its potential value for alternate economic developments, the decision to build the dam must be based on the costs and value of the Wintego Dam alone.

Since there was not a single set of recommendations produced by the study, there are some contradictions in the findings and recommendations of several reports.

People in Saskatchewan should be made aware of the fact that the Saskatchewan Power Corporation (SPC) has alternate possibilities for power development, including the expansion of lignite coal plants, and three significant hydro sites on the Saskatchewan River - Nipawin, Choiceland and Forks. Industrial uses of energy in the province have actually declined, and SPC may have overestimated the growth of energy usage in the province.

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[1] M. Kelly, *Commercial Fisheries Data Base and Economic Evaluation of the Fisheries of the Churchill River Study Area*, Sponsored by the Churchill Committee, 1977. For copies of the summary of this study, contact the Churchill Committee.

"Run of the river" hydro dams are also possible, which do not result in such widespread flooding.

PRIMARY CONCERNS REGARDING THE WINTEGO PROPOSAL AND CRS SECTOR FINDINGS

After examining the Wintego proposal and the various CRS study reports, the Committee would like to express the following concerns about the proposed Wintego development and the study findings.

SPC Wintego Proposal

1) Clearing of Timber in the Reservoir

A primary concern of the Churchill Committee is the matter of clearing the timber in the area which would be flooded if the proposal was approved.

Both the Forestry and Fisheries Sectors of CRS asked for complete clearing of the trees in the reservoir to three feet above the highest expected water level. According to these reports, this is absolutely necessary for the future of commercial fishing, to prevent slumping of trees along the shore, and tohelp the shoreline to return to "normal".

The Committee's additional concern with clearing is to lessen the danger of those travelling on the river. Floating and submerged logs and debris are extremely dangerous and can damage boats and motors. Without complete clearing, it would be impossible to safely travel on, or commercially fish, the reservoir.

While SPC states that "complete clearing" would be carried out in the future reservoir if the project was approved, Department of Northern Saskatchewan Forestry personnel say it is highly questionable that the clearing could be completed in the time provided (300 men, for 16 months).

The Committee is concerned that if the project was approved, the Wintego reservoir might end up like Tobin Lake, the reservoir for the Squaw Rapids hydro-electric dam. Although clearing was intended in the reservoir, *"an abnormal rainfall in 1962...hampered the burning of brush piles. At this stage, the dam was in place and water impoundment had started. Construction timetable constraints and economic considerations forced the re-allocation of clearing activity to those areas of the reservoir considered suitable for recreation. Consequently, there were areas where unburned brush piles were inundated with rising water."*[1]

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[1] Fish and Game Sportsman, Spring, 1977.

of all earned income in the area.) In the approximate 15 years required for the fishery to re-establish, Pelican Narrows alone could lose approximately $576,500 in income from fishing.

Although the potential $405 per week from fishing the Churchill-Reindeer River System is probably the highest paying work available to local people in northern Saskatchewan, it also is a traditional and personally rewarding seasonal occupation. With the loss of the high profit Churchill-Reindeer River fishery, many fishermen would probably leave the industry permanently. Because of the lack of economic opportunities in the north, the loss of fishing as a viable job opportunity could have disastrous effects on the economic and social structure of these communities. With the loss of commercial fishing in the area, the most likely alternative for most of these people would be welfare.

Effects on Wildlife, Trapping and Hunting

Many animals would have to move from the 112 square miles of flooded area, and the loss of rapids and marshy areas would seriously affect many animals and birds. Competition with other animals in the new areas could be fierce.

The interaction of the animals of the Churchill Basin was not examined. Among the animals which were not studied were lynx, wolves, fox, bears, rabbits, squirrels, weasels, fisher, marten, and many small animals that are important food sources for larger animals.

Trapping and hunting would be seriously reduced:

- muskrat would be almost totally eliminated
- only 3 out of every 10 beaver would survive
- mink and otter would decrease by about 25% to 40%
- ducks in the area would decrease by about half
- moose could be seriously endangered by increased hunting in the area by construction workers (1,250 workers required in the third year)
- bald eagles would decrease by about 75%

Important questions, such as compensation for trappers whose livelihood would be eliminated were not dealt with.

The Committee would also recommend that, if the project proceeds, protective measures should be taken to protect the moose population from the large numbers of construction workers which would be in the area.

Effects on Transportation

1) Spring and Summer

During the spring and summer, water levels would be very low downstream from the dam and could negatively affect water transportation.

Unless the reservoir is properly cleared, both boat and air transportation by float planes on the reservoir would be extremely dangerous in the summer, due to standing trees and floating logs and debris. Two-foot stumps along

the shoreline would also hinder boat launching.

The reservoir would be frozen for 40 days longer than at present. Most of this extra ice-covered period would occur in the spring, affecting late trapping and early fishing transportation, as well as air travel on the reservoir.

2) Winter

"Rotten" ice conditions will be common around floating debris and trees or stumps protruding through the ice.

Water let out of the reservoir in winter would cause the reservoir ice to crack and shift and could make transportation dangerous for those who use the reservoir. This "bad ice" could also affect the movement of animals.

The great amounts of water let out of the dam at various times over the winter will also result in unstable ice farther downstream.

Socio-Economic/Cost-Benefit

The immense impact of this project on the social and economic nature of each community was not studied. For example, how would Pelican Narrows be affected by a construction camp being located about 30 miles away which consisted of about 1250 men in the third year of construction - almost the total population of every man, woman and child in Pelican Narrows?

The impact of the dam on traditional economic pursuits such as trapping and commercial fishing were downplayed, by averaging such incomes over the entire area. When these statistics are rearranged from a community or individual standpoint, they can emphasize the heavy reliance of local people on such traditional seasonal employment. Also the fact that transfer payments may be the only alternative for many of these people who now depend on traditional employment was underemphasized.

The value of the traditional economy has greatly increased since the time of the CRS and forms a large portion of earned income in the area. No explanation was made of how local people whose livelihood would be lost or greatly decreased would be compensated, or what they would do, faced with limited economic alternatives.

Although the dam could provide some temporary benefits to northerners, no training programs or employment is guaranteed, and only 15 jobs would remain after the project was completed. Following the completion of the project, northerners in the area would be left with fewer job options than before, since many traditional employment opportunities would be lost.

It is quite possible that if the project proceeded, costs could exceed many times the predicted estimate. (In Manitoba, the Churchill-Nelson hydro project exceeded original estimates by five times.)

Because many costs of the project were not included in SPC estimates, the Wintego project may in fact be more expensive than alternate power developments, not only in human terms, but also in financial ones. Among these costs are:

- compensation to fishermen for upgrading of equipment, damages to their gear, and increased costs of every aspect of commercial fishing. In addition to a 10 to 15 year loss in commercial fishing, fishing in the reservoir may never be profitable.
- compensation to trappers for loss of livelihood
- monitoring and stocking of fish in the reservoir lost through extreme differences in water levels from the dam (a costly, but necessary recommendation if the dam proceeded).
- long-term economic losses which may be much greater than the CRS anticipated (already documented for commercial fishing in the recent Churchill Committee study)
- human costs in the local communities
- costs of increased welfare for lost livelihoods with no job alternatives

Community Briefs

In the future, the Committee has planned a research program which would be carried out by local researchers in each of the five communities. Local researchers will interview community residents to document their concerns about the proposed Wintego development. The areas surrounding each community will be mapped to show the current use of the land and water for such things as trapping, fishing, hunting, cabins and campsites, recreational use, herb and berry picking spots, and areas with religious and historic importance. The effects which the dam would have on these uses will also be documented. Socio-economic information such as domestic consumption, etc. will also be gathered in interviews. In this way, the importance of land use for each community, and how these uses would be affected by the dam will be documented visually as well as verbally.

A special study will be carried out on the environmental, social and economic effects of the Island Falls Dam on Sandy Bay, since there may be important similarities between this and the Wintego Dam development.

Alternate resource development possibilities will be identified for each community, and local attitudes and preferences of local people towards these developments will be recorded.

From this and background research information, community briefs will be written, which are to be approved by local residents. A regional brief will also be produced, which will summarize the community briefs into overall regional concerns. These briefs will also contain the safeguards and guarantees which northern people would consider necessary, should the project proceed.

The Committee plans to provide financial aid to northern groups who require assistance to prepare briefs. They will also provide clerical help and information on all aspects of the proposal, and will continue to contact northern groups to encourage the preparation of briefs.

The Board of Inquiry will hold public hearings in each of the five directly affected communities in January, 1978. At that time, any interested individuals or groups will be able to give their point of view on the project. On the basis of information presented, the Board of Inquiry will make recommendations to the Department of Environment regarding whether the dam should be built, and if so, under what conditions. These recommendations will be taken to cabinet to make the final decision.

The Churchill Committee welcomes any inquiries for information and assistance regarding the Wintego proposal, preparation of briefs, and community information meetings. Contact the local community representative or the Churchill Committee office in La Ronge for further information.

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